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Burke, James Francis

Stephen Collins Foster

[S.I.]

[1923?]

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STEPHEN COLLINS FOSTER



308
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Box 135-

Address of
HONORABLE JAMES FRANCIS BURKE

General Counsel of The Chamber of Commerce
of Pittsburgh

DEDICATING THE FOSTER MEMORIAL
AT BARDSTOWN, KENTUCKY
ON JULY 4th, 1923

To the Honorable

Nicholas Murray Butler

with the compliments of

James Francis Burke

STEPHEN COLLINS FOSTER



Address of
HONORABLE JAMES FRANCIS BURKE

General Counsel of The Chamber of Commerce
of Pittsburgh

DEDICATING THE FOSTER MEMORIAL
AT BARDSTOWN, KENTUCKY
ON JULY 4th, 1923

THE INCIDENT

¶ Twenty-five thousand people participated in the Dedication of the famous Rowan Homestead purchased by the State of Kentucky and set apart to Foster's Memory.

¶ Hon. Edwin P. Morrow, Governor of Kentucky, presided. Hon. Daniel Winters, President of Council, spoke for the City of Pittsburgh. A. L. Humphrey, President, spoke for the Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce, and Wm. H. Stevenson for the Western Pennsylvania Historical Society.

¶ Mr. Burke delivered the formal address on Stephen C. Foster.

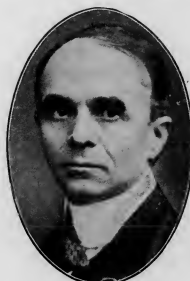
¶ The Pittsburgh Committee consisted of W. H. Stevenson, Gen. A. J. Logan, Wm. H. Davis, Thomas A. Dunn, A. L. Humphrey, Robert Garland and Daniel Winters.

Oct. 16, 1923 Me.

STEPHEN COLLINS FOSTER

Address of HONORABLE JAMES FRANCIS BURKE,
General Counsel of The Chamber of Commerce of
Pittsburgh, Dedication of the Foster Memorial
at Bardstown, Kentucky, on
July 4th, 1923

The purpose of this gathering is to pay tribute to the works and perpetuate the memory of a genius who brought millions under the magic spell of his melody.



James Francis Burke

Pennsylvania and Kentucky vie with each other at this hour in manifesting the pride they feel because one gave him birth and the other gave him the inspiration for one of the most beautiful folk-songs that ever induced human beings to blend their voices in the harmonies of the universe.

DWELT AMID DREAMS

As a composer, Stephen C. Foster dwelt in no small circle.

It was not the narrow streets he walked nor the few companions with whom he communed from day to day that inspired his muse and tuned his minstrel's harp. His real abode was rather in a land of dreams which seemed to radiate the spirit of song as the sun radiates the light of day, and which he in turn converted as if by magic into the

purest and simplest melodies the world has ever known. To the outer world harmony was the keynote of his career. If discord entered his life, he bore his burden uncomplainingly and alone.

To attempt to fathom the soul depths of Stephen C. Foster for the purpose of revealing the hidden secret of that pathos which runs like a golden thread through the fabric of his finest melodies might be justified by our anxiety to analyze, either certain attributes of character or certain incidents in his life responsible for this melancholy strain, but I prefer to allow the sleeping singer and his secret to rest with each other in the grave in which they both lie buried.

From what is generally known, his career was but another reminder that the lives of all of us are a series of contrasting scenes and conflicting emotions. The events that cross our pathway form a chapter of contradictions, of lights and shadows, of tears and laughter, of failures and successes. Today we smoothly sail over placid waters as we sing away the hours that are free from sorrow, and tomorrow, with moistened cheek and bleeding feet, we wend our weary way over the "Via Dolorosa," and chant our "Miserere."

THE PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

As age multiplies our experiences, matures our judgment, moderates our passions, and develops that spirit of philosophy which God implanted in the very depths of all our souls, we become more and more reconciled to our good and bad fortunes, realizing as we near our destiny that the history of every human being contains the story of its cross, as well as those brighter pages that exhale the wholesome, fragrant breath of life's sweetest sensations.

The primary purpose of our civilization is gradually to eliminate the world's discordant elements; to subdue at first and ultimately to destroy the grosser things in all of us that grate upon the finer sensibilities with which, in some degree, we are all endowed; and finally, to unveil and encourage the virtues that inhere in our fellowmen.

Experience emphasizes each day the fact that

"When we see amid the evil
All the golden grains of good,
We will love each other better
When we're better understood."

Insofar as lies within our power, our ambition should be so to adjust life's deeds, so to arrange life's scenes, and so to attune life's sounds as to yield the greatest degree of pleasure to those with whom we come in contact.

Stephen Foster did this in an unusual degree. If he was any man's enemy, he was his own, and like many a poet and genius before him, an early grave was the penalty of his shortcomings. To the world he was never harsh; to his fellowmen he never uttered a discordant note.

When he wrote

"We will sing one song," etc.,

his purpose was not merely to punctuate silence, but so to attune sentiment to sound that the heart would be touched, the mind influenced, the memory revived, or the imagination aroused in such a manner that those who shared the spirit of his song might either live again amid the scenes of bygone days, or be transported on the wings of melody to those celestial abiding places in the land of dreams, to enter which the spirit of poetry and song is the surest passport.

SUBLIME IN SIMPLICITY.

In the melody that inspired the State of Kentucky to dedicate to his everlasting fame this sacred piece of Kentucky's soil and this home that recalls the memories of other days, Foster, by a combination of words and harmony that are sublime in their simplicity, even now reveals the scenes and revives the songs in which the darkies reveled in those days that are gone forever.

While the euphony and the romance that attach to the word "Kentucky" heighten the artistic standard of the lines he put to music, the enduring qualities of the song itself are attributable to the fact that, its charms in this instance were enhanced by the fact that the Old Kentucky

home became the symbol of every "home" throughout the world, and consequently, since it was first written, the song has aroused in the breasts of millions not only a longing for home and other days, but an instinctive desire to join in the great chorus which its simple harmony seems to invite.

INTERESTING HISTORY

From purely historical and literary standpoints, there are certain features of this song and certain incidents in Foster's life which may properly be adverted to on an occasion of this character and importance.

BORN AND BURIED IN PITTSBURGH.

Foster was born in Pittsburgh on the 4th of July, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of our Declaration of Independence,—on the same day and within a few hours of the time that John Adams, the second President of the United States, died at Quincy, Massachusetts, and Thomas Jefferson, the third President of the United States, died at Monticello, Va.

Thirty-eight years afterwards, on the 21st of January, 1864, when Foster was laid to rest under the soil and snow on the hills of Lawrenceville, within voice-range of where he was born and spent his boyhood, the song whose echoes were borne away on the wintry winds was "My Old Kentucky Home."

Yes, the song of old Kentucky sanctified the short and simple ceremony that marked the passing forever of Stephen Collins Foster from the loving circle of his kinsmen.

And now, after a lapse of sixty years, on this sacred spot of Southern soil, the sons and daughters of Kentucky and Pennsylvania join in their tributes to the minstrel in whose heart that song was born, and in dedicating to his memory the scene in which he found its inspiration.

His association with this place came through his grandmother, Ann Barclay, through whom Foster was related to Judge John Rowan, one of the first United States Senators from Kentucky, and in whose home the song "My Old Kentucky Home" is generally assumed to have been written.

WHERE WAS IT WRITTEN?

While this latter statement has given rise to a controversy, it is, nevertheless, conceded that this home and its surrounding cabins of pre-war days were the prompting spirit for one of the most popular folk-songs that ever attuned themselves to the ears of the children and men.

While the captious critic may concern himself with the question as to whether the poet actually sat amid these scenes as he wrote, those of larger view will satisfy themselves with the more substantial fact that in the halo of romance attaching to the scene which his song described, he found his motive, and that the sentiment underlying the song itself was so wholesome and fundamentally expressive of the world's love of home, that it needed only the melody which Foster's genius could contribute, to insure its place in the realms of everlasting harmony.

The text of the song and the chorus being contradictory, they throw no light on this question. In the two main verses, the words "**My Old Kentucky Home**" occur, while in the chorus, we find the words "**The Old Kentucky Home.**"

We must keep in mind, however, that the use of either "**the**" or "**my**" alone might not necessarily have shed any light upon the question as to whether he was in Pennsylvania or Kentucky when he wrote it, inasmuch as the song was presumed to be that of a negro slave and not a white man's lament.

And this also brings to mind the fact that Foster, in this song, entirely discarded the negro dialect in which he had written his former songs, and wrote it in the purer English of which he was capable.

In addition to the Kentucky atmosphere of the song itself, the most impressive proofs that it was composed here is found in the statement of his brother, Morrison Foster, and the scholarly historical review of Mr. Young E. Allison.

CONCEALED HIS NAME

Up to this time his fame had rested solely upon his negro melodies, most of which were introduced through the

instrumentality of "Christy's Famous Minstrels." Not only was every song he wrote popularized by the Christy Minstrels, but Foster had gone so far as to have some of them published and copyrighted with the name of E. P. Christy as their author.

Foster's mastery of melody was not acquired. His love of music was instinctive. At the age of eleven in one of his first letters, written from the home of a relative in Youngstown, Ohio, he pleaded with his father in Pittsburgh to "send me the comic songster which you promised me some time ago."

At the age of twelve he played the flute and beat the drum with the skill of a prodigy. Later he became proficient on the piano.

A NATURAL MINSTREL

In addition to being a writer, Foster was a real artist in singing negro melodies. He was the star performer in a boy minstrel show, which for a long time attracted the entire neighborhood to a local barn that had been transformed into a theatre by the youth of the vicinity.

Of his musical talent while at Athens Academy, a classmate, William Wallace Kingsbury, who afterwards became United States Senator from Minnesota, wrote the following:

"His was a nature generous to a fault, with a soul attuned to harmony. His love of music was an all-absorbing passion and his execution on the flute the very genius of melody, and gave rise to those flights of inspired pathos which have charmed the English speaking world with their excellence from cabin to palace."

It was while at Athens Academy that the first piece of music that Foster ever wrote was produced at a public concert in the old Presbyterian Church on the first of April, 1841. It was called "The Tioga Waltz," which Foster and three others played on their flutes and won the applause of the house.

In addition to his progress at the Academy he pursued other studies with diligence and success. He made an effort at the classics and to an extent mastered German and

French and took up water color painting and later the study of a higher quality of music. But aside from very well written letters, disclosing the command of a high standard of English, there is nothing to indicate unusual achievements in any of these loftier aspirations.

Suffice it to say that he realized ultimately that there was real virtue in his Ethiopian songs, and on the 25th of May, 1852, he disclosed an unusual situation and made a remarkable request in a letter to E. P. Christy, the noted minstrel. In part, the letter reads as follows:

"As I once intimated to you, I had the intention of omitting my name from my Ethiopian songs, owing to the prejudice against them by some, which might injure my reputation as a writer of another style of music, but I find that by my efforts I have done a great deal to build up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste. Therefore, I have concluded to re-instate my name on my songs and to pursue the Ethiopian business without fear or shame, and lend all my energies to establish my name as the best Ethiopian song writer. But I am not encouraged as long as "The Old Folks At Home" stares me in the face with another's name on it. As it was at my own solicitation that you allowed your name to be placed on the song, I hope that the above reasons will be sufficient explanation of my desire to place my own name on it as author and composer.

It was in this same year that Foster and his wife Jane McDowell, the daughter of a prominent physician made a trip on the steamboat "James Millinger" to New Orleans, which trip, with the possible visit to this estate in Bardstown, Ky., is the only record that Foster, "the melodist of the South," was ever in the South.

Time forbids detailing the story of his other popular successes, but I may indulge a brief reference to "The Swanee River," more correctly called "The Old Folks At Home," which was written in 1851.

In 1888 I was engaged to report the address of Rutherford B. Hays, former President of the United States, dedicating the famous Richardson Court House at Pittsburgh.

STORY OF THE "SWANEE"

While the vast audience was assembling, the Hon. Morrison Foster, a prominent figure of his day, sat next to me on the platform. After the band had played a Foster melody, the Senator told me the story of his brother Stephen's composition of the song which I have just mentioned. In substance he said:

"He came to my house and told me of his new song, the music of which he had completed, but the words of which were still in doubt. As he struck the various notes on the piano, he indicated his dislike for the word 'Pedee' River, which was in his original manuscript. It had to be a Southern river with a name of two syllables. He asked for names and I suggested 'Yazoo,' but that offended his poetic sensibilities. Finally, we got out an old geography and I ran across the "Swanee River" in Florida and mentioned it, whereupon he said, exultantly, "That's it!" and for the first time, he sang the line 'Way down upon the Swanee River.'"

I may be pardoned for saying that twenty-eight years after recording the dedicatory address on the completion of that structure, I was called upon myself to deliver the dedicatory address on the completion of the new Court House that succeeded it immediately across the way, and again today, thirty-five years afterwards, I am honored with a place on this program, dedicating this memorial to the genius, whose brother, more than a third of a century ago, told me the story of Foster's vicissitudes and triumphs in composing one of his greatest songs.

WHAT IS MUSIC?

As a student of the outstanding characters and events in history, I have been amazed to find that in the presumably authenticated history of music there is not the slightest reference to Stephen Collins Foster.

Music has been described as the art of arranging sounds for the purpose of creating a definite aesthetic impression. If this be true you can no more exclude Foster from the history of music than you can shut out the sun that lights

the path of day, or stifle the fragrance with which the flowers of the field burden the summer breeze.

But let the so-called authorities revel as they will in the recognition of their pet harmonies and flowers the products of the masters from Beethoven to Burbank.

For my part, however, I am content to invite my fellow-man to the meadows where the wild roses grow in the belief that he will exclaim, "There is beauty;" and I am content to take him again beyond the mountain stream where the birds make the woodlands ring with the melody of their song, with the assurance that I will hear him say, "There is harmony;" and, finally, I am willing to bid him in every corner of civilization to give ear to the songs of Stephen C. Foster, convinced that in the exquisite exultation of the moment he will exclaim, "There is music!"

STRANGE PATHWAY OF GENIUS

My friends, our brief review is about concluded, and as I close may I ask, why does the path that genius trods lead so frequently to an early grave?

Does the divine spark consume the body by the heat of its own flame?

Robert Burns died at thirty-six and Byron passed away at thirty-seven. Shelley breathed his last at thirty and the lips of Keats were sealed at the age of twenty-six. Edgar Allen Poe died in a delirium at forty, and Stephen Collins Foster, at the age of thirty-seven received his mortal wounds in a Bowery basement amid the slums of New York City, in every highway and byway of which his melodies had been whistled and warbled a thousand times by his contemporaries. He died in Bellevue Hospital in whose morgue his body lay for hours among those unknown, unhonored, and unsung.

His heritage to mankind was the cluster of melodies which he had stored away like jewels in the breasts of millions of God's children, jewels of which they would not be robbed and which they carried with them in all their travels and wanderings over the world.

ADDRESS OF HONORABLE JAMES FRANCIS BURKE

In the palace of American genius there have been many knights and many nobles, but measured by the accents of the poet through which those who are divinely gifted find their way into every human heart, the Prince of the Purple Chamber lay dead when Stephen C. Foster pillowed his weary head in the gentle arms of his Maker, and joined "The Old Folks At Home" who had gone before.



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